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ABSTRACT

These two studies, which were part of a cross-national project exploring the development of Italian and British children's understanding of sociolinguistic rules, investigated politeness in children's requests addressed to adults and children, and children's views on how requests addressed to persons differing in status and familiarity would be expressed and answered. Participants in study 1 were 64 4- to 9-year-old Italian and 42 4- to 8-year-old English children; study 2 involved 40 7- to 9-year-old Italian children. Findings of study 1 indicated that older Italian and English children used level of linguistic politeness as a cue for identifying addressees of requests. This behavior was in contrast to that of the younger members of the groups. Findings of study 2 suggested principles guiding Italian children's views about using linguistic politeness, namely, that one should: (1) be polite when addressing people; (2) expect polite directives from peers but do not expect much politeness from adults; (3) be polite with both familiar and unfamiliar people, but expect less politeness from unfamiliar than from familiar people; and (4) expect more politeness between unfamiliar peers than between familiar peers, but less politeness between unfamiliar adult and child than between familiar adult and child. Italian children seemed to base their requests mainly on interrogative forms and on the use of "please." As age increased, they used auxiliary verbs and justifications. (RH)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL PRAGMATICS
A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY OF THE CASE OF LINGUISTIC POLITENESS

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL PRAGMATICS
A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY OF THE CASE OF LINGUISTIC POLITENESS

The study presented here is part of a larger cross national project investigating the development of understanding of socio-linguistic rules in Italian and British children.

The development of pragmatic skills is an interesting domain for cross-cultural research since pragmatics includes all those relationships between language and context which are represented in the structure of all languages (Levinson, 1983). For example, it has been suggested that rules for speech acts, such as requests or responses, are socio-linguistic in nature (e.g., Dore, 1977). As such, socio-linguistic rules portray a notion of social exchange which may vary between culture. When speakers perform requests or responses, they use social rules which originate within their culture and are represented in their language. As Bruner has suggested "learning how to request is not just learning language or even just speech acts. It is also learning the culture and how to get things done by language in that culture." (Bruner, 1983, p.115).

In recent times considerable attention has been focused on the development of pragmatics during childhood. In particular, requests produced by American English-speaking children have been studied in natural (Newcombe and Zaslow, 1981), experimental (Speckman and Roth, 1985) and role-playing (Becker, 1986) settings. Results show that older children have generally mastered a wider variety of indirect forms of requesting than younger children. For example, 9-year-old children will regularly use embedded imperatives, such as "Would you give me", as well as the direct imperative "Give me" commonly adopted by 5-year-olds (Axia and Baroni, 1985). Similar developments are evident in studies which have analysed children's ability to change their speech to suit their addressee's characteristics (Read and Cherry, 1978; Sachs and Devin, 1976). For example, it is well known that older children will simplify their speech when talking to younger children. In this case the role of children's social knowledge in socio-linguistic development has been emphasised.

As developmental psychologists, we are interested still in investigating both generalities and specificities in children's development. The pattern of development of requesting suggested by the North-American literature cannot be taken for granted especially since all aspects of socio-linguistics are culturally embedded. Accepting Jahoda's (1986) suggestion, we have been especially concerned with children's construction of social world - as far as development of language is involved. The aim of the present paper is to present some possible directions for research in this general area focusing specifically on the domain of

linguistic politeness.

The study of linguistic politeness is of interest to those concerned with the development of socio-linguistic skills. Linguistic politeness can be considered as a verbal device whose function is to establish and maintain positive social interaction. Brown (1980, p.114) argued that "what politeness essentially consists of is in a special way of treating people, saying and doing things in such a way to take into account the other person's feelings.". The requirements of politeness include: ability to take into account the other person's attitude, mood and intentions; recognition of the reciprocity, in social terms, of the relationship between participants in the exchange (for example, status, roles, degree of familiarity, etc.); and the awareness of degree of formality or informality of the social situation (for example, a party, a lecture, etcetera).

Literature on linguistic politeness in children reveals a developmental trend in choice of directives (Camras, Pristo and Brown, 1983). By the age of seven or so, American children can vary the level of politeness of their speech according to their addressees' status. Similar findings were observed in a study of Italian children; they could use polite requests in order to circumvent difficulties in natural situations. For example, in a setting in which children have to ask an adult for pegs to complete the task only older children were found to make their requests more polite following a previous refusal by the adult (from "give me a red peg" to "would you give me a peg,please?"). However, it was not apparent until the age of nine (Axia and Baroni, 1985).

The object of the cross-cultural investigation, of which the present paper is based, is to elucidate similarities and differences between Italian and British children both in the attribution and the production of directives in different social contexts. The general aim is to cast more light on the development of a social skill which is deeply embedded in the meaning systems which different cultures attribute to social interactions.

STUDY 1

In the first experiment, sixty-four 4 to 9 year old Italian children were shown a picture of a man and a boy sitting on a sofa watching TV. Another person, either a boy or a man, is seen entering the room (OVERHEAD 1). The experimenter explains that the latter individual also wants to sit down to watch TV and, reporting the speaker's precise words, illustrates how he makes his request. The actual word used were either "Spostati! (direct imperative, impolite: "move over") or "Vorresti spostarti, per favore?" (embedded imperative, more polite: "would you move over, please?"). The subject's task was to identify whether the addressee was the man or the boy. It was expected that more

polite requests would be directed towards the adult man; less polite towards the boy. Analysis of frequency with which the seated child or man was identified as the addressee of polite or impolite requests revealed that only 9 year olds differentiated significantly between the characters on this basis. Moreover, it was only among this age group that response justifications included specific reference to linguistic politeness as a relevant cue. For instance, one 9 year old justified his choice of addressee for the impolite request by saying "Because you can't tell parents, because parents are grown ups, and you must be respectful". Younger children justified their choice of addressee either egocentrically (for example, "because I want it to be him") or with reference to incidental aspects of the situation (for example, "because there is more room next to the man").

This experiment was subsequently repeated with a sample of forty-two 4 to 8 year old British children. Comparable analyses to those carried out with the Italian children revealed once more that it was only the oldest subjects who reliably utilised linguistic politeness as a cue to addressee identity. (OVERHEAD 2). Older children of both cultures attributed polite requests as addressed mainly to an adult and impolite requests as addressed mainly to a child.

From the above results we may conclude that it is not until the age of 8/9 years that Italian and British children take into account level of linguistic politeness to understand social roles in a given interaction. There are, however, some questions which are left unanswered. In particular, while we know that 8/9 year old children consider polite requests as more suitable to higher-status addressees it is unclear which other politeness rules inform children's thinking. By analogy with other domains of children's social cognition we need detailed description of the contents of children's politeness rules. In addition, a detailed analysis is needed of the linguistic means employed by children of different ages to convey politeness in different social context and whether the linguistic strategies adopted by children of different languages differ.

STUDY 2

A second study is currently underway with the purpose of addressing these issues. This study is as yet incomplete and as a result we will only present data for 7 and 9 year old Italian children. In this experiment forty Italian children were exposed to a series of eight graphically presented cameos in which a child is seen to interact with one of four individuals who varied in status and familiarity. These were an unknown peer, a close friend, an unknown teacher, the child's mother. In four instances the subject was pictorially presented with a situation in which the main character has to make a request of the other. In the

other four instances the situation involved the main character in receiving a request from the other. In both cases, the subject's task was to report how the request would be expressed and to report what the answer to that request would be. (OVERHEAD 3). For example: "Imagine it is the first day of a new term at school. In the morning Gianni's mother sets out to take him to school. On the way she stops at a shop where she needs to buy some groceries. After paying for the groceries she asks Gianni for help in carrying them. What do you think she would say to Gianni? what do you think Gianni's reply would be?". Children's responses were tape-recordered and transcribed.

Responses were scored in terms of presence or absence of four linguistic elements: a) interrogative form, b) "please", c) auxiliary verb, d) justification for the request. As a result each directive produced by children had a "politeness value" ranging from 0 to 4, according to the number of elements present. For example: (OVERHEAD 3B) "Gianni, per piacere metti via i colori nell'armadio" (Gianni, please put the paints into the cupboard) has just one element of politeness, that is "please" and was scored 1; while "Mi puoi dare un po' della tua merenda, per piacere? ho dimenticato la mia a casa" (Will you give me some of your lunch, please? I left mine at home) has all 4 elements of politeness and was scored 4. A series of ANOVAs were carried out considering such factors as age of subjects, sex, age of characters, degree of familiarity between characters, etcetera.

For the purpose of this paper the results will be considered in relation to two main issues:

1. which social factors influence linguistic politeness for Italian children?

2. which linguistic elements are used by Italian children to convey politeness in different social situations?

Socio-linguistic principles of politeness in Italian children

Firstly, neither age of subjects nor sex were found to be significant main factors in children's understanding of politeness rules. However, several significant interactions between factors were found which offer an interesting description of the apparent socio-linguistic principles employed by children. Three general principles appear to inform children's production of requests:

The first is: be polite when addressing people (especially adults), expect polite directives from peers but do not expect much politeness from adults (OVERHEAD 4).

The second principle is: be polite with both familiar and unfamiliar people, but expect less politeness from unfamiliar than from more familiar people (OVERHEAD 5).

The third principle is: more polite is expected between unfamiliar peers than familiar peers, but less politeness is expected between unfamiliar adult and child than between familiar adult and child. (OVERHEAD 6). In particular, the least politeness is expected from an unfamiliar adult addressing a child (OVERHEAD 7).

Linguistic elements of politeness in requests

Overhead 8 shows the frequency of use of four politeness elements. It is clear that when making requests children widely use interrogative forms, include please and auxiliary verbs to a lesser degree and only rarely justify their requests (OVERHEAD 8).

Overhead 9 shows the distribution of four politeness elements according to age of subjects. Nine year olds incorporate many more justifications and use more auxiliary verbs than younger peers who use more interrogatives and similar number of "please" (OVERHEAD 9).

More detailed analyses of these overall age differences revealed different use of the four linguistic elements depending upon whether it was an adult or a child who was been addressed. Firstly, 9 year olds expect more imperative forms from unfamiliar adult than from anyone else. Secondly, neither 7 nor 9 year olds regularly use "please" when addressing the mother. Children in fact seem to use "please" to express politeness when social distance is comparatively greater. Thirdly, children tend to use the greatest amount of auxiliaries when addressing an adult rather than a peer. The use of "may I" (posso?) or "would you" (puoi?), for instance, appears to be a subtle linguistic means to convey acknowledgement of the higher status addressee's freedom of action. Finally, 7 year olds do not expect justifications at all when addressed by adults. Nine year olds do expect them, especially from unfamiliar adults. They seem to think, quite intelligently, that more justifications are needed with unfamiliar rather than with familiar people. In addition, 9 year olds believe that justification are more appropriate when interacting with peers than do 7 year olds.

Responses to questions

A final analysis considered children's beliefs about the response of addressee to the request made. Only three kinds of response were possible: positive responses, which complied with the request; conditional responses, in which limitations were imposed upon the fulfilment of the request (for instance, "Gianni, will you lend me your new book?", the answer is "Yes, but just for a short time because I want to read it"); and negative responses, in which the request was refused.

To offer a conditional or negative response to a question, however, is rather difficult when the addressed person does not want to hurt the other person's feelings. The question is: do children understand that there are conditions in which negative or conditional answers to reasonable questions are acceptable? In the majority of cases children made positive responses to requests. On those occasions when conditional or negative responses were offered, then children appeared to be following the socio-linguistic principles outlined below.

- More negative answers are expected when addressing than when receiving a request.

- When children address adults they expect more negative responses than from a peer, but children offer less negative answers to requests from adults than from peers.

- When children make requests the familiarity of the addressee is an important factor. When addressing adults the greater the familiarity, the more negative responses are expected. On the other hand, when addressing peers greater familiarity results in fewer negative responses. In other words, they expect more negative responses from mothers than from teachers and more negative responses from new aquaintances than from friends. When they are addressed familiarity is not an issue. They are allowed to say "no" to all peers but generally are not allowed to say "no" to adults.

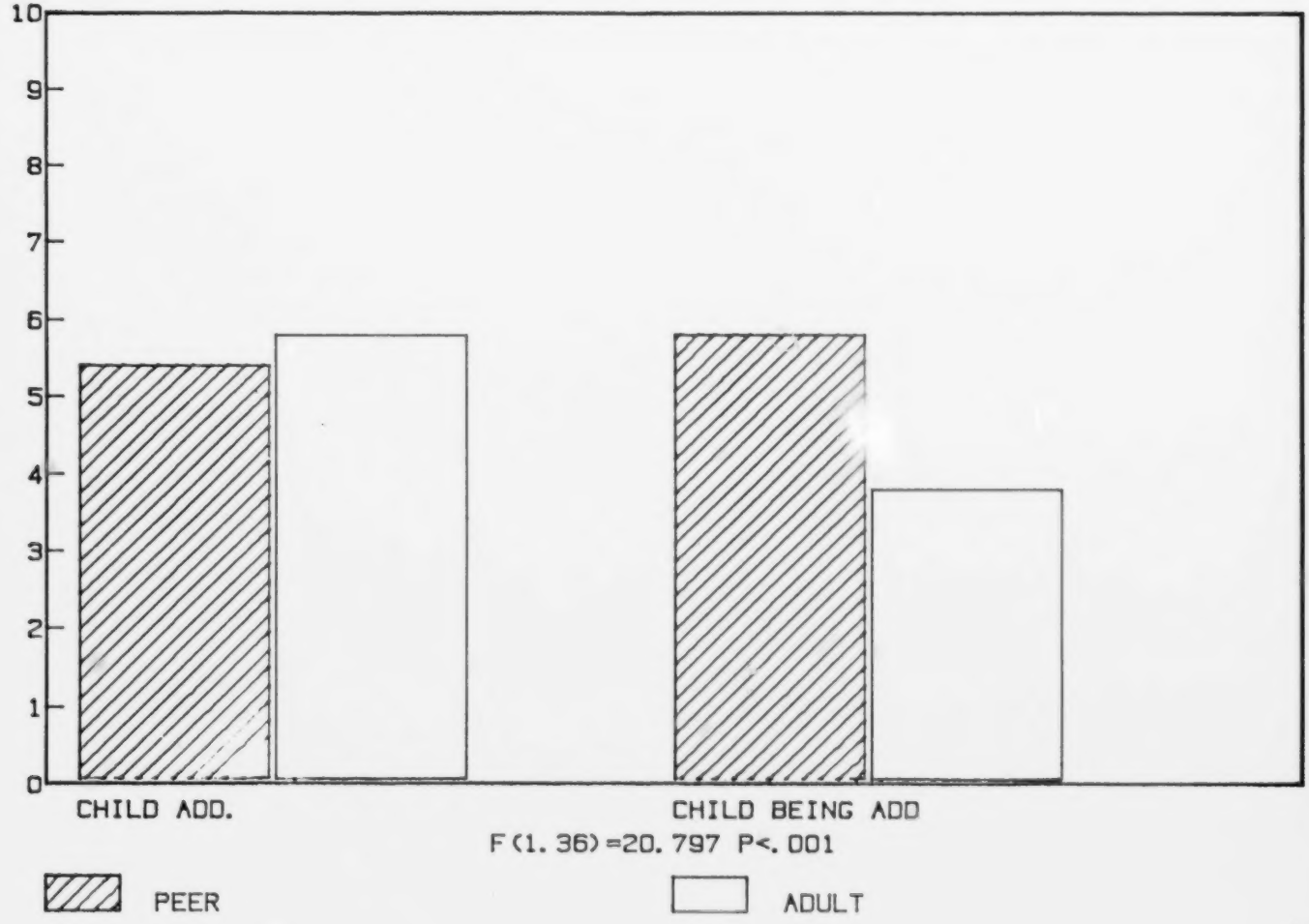
In brief, in the first study it was found that it is not until the age of 8/9 year that children use the level of linguistic politeness as a relevant cue to identify to whom a specific request is addressed. This finding was evident both in Italian and English children.

In the second study several socio-linguistic principles were outlined which appeared to guide Italian children's thinking about the use of linguistic politeness. In addition, Italian children seem to base their requests mainly on interrogative forms and on the use of "please". However, with increasing age two more linguistic devices are used, that is auxiliary verbs and justifications. It is our intention to assess whether similar principles also apply to the way English children understand the use of polite language in formulating requests.

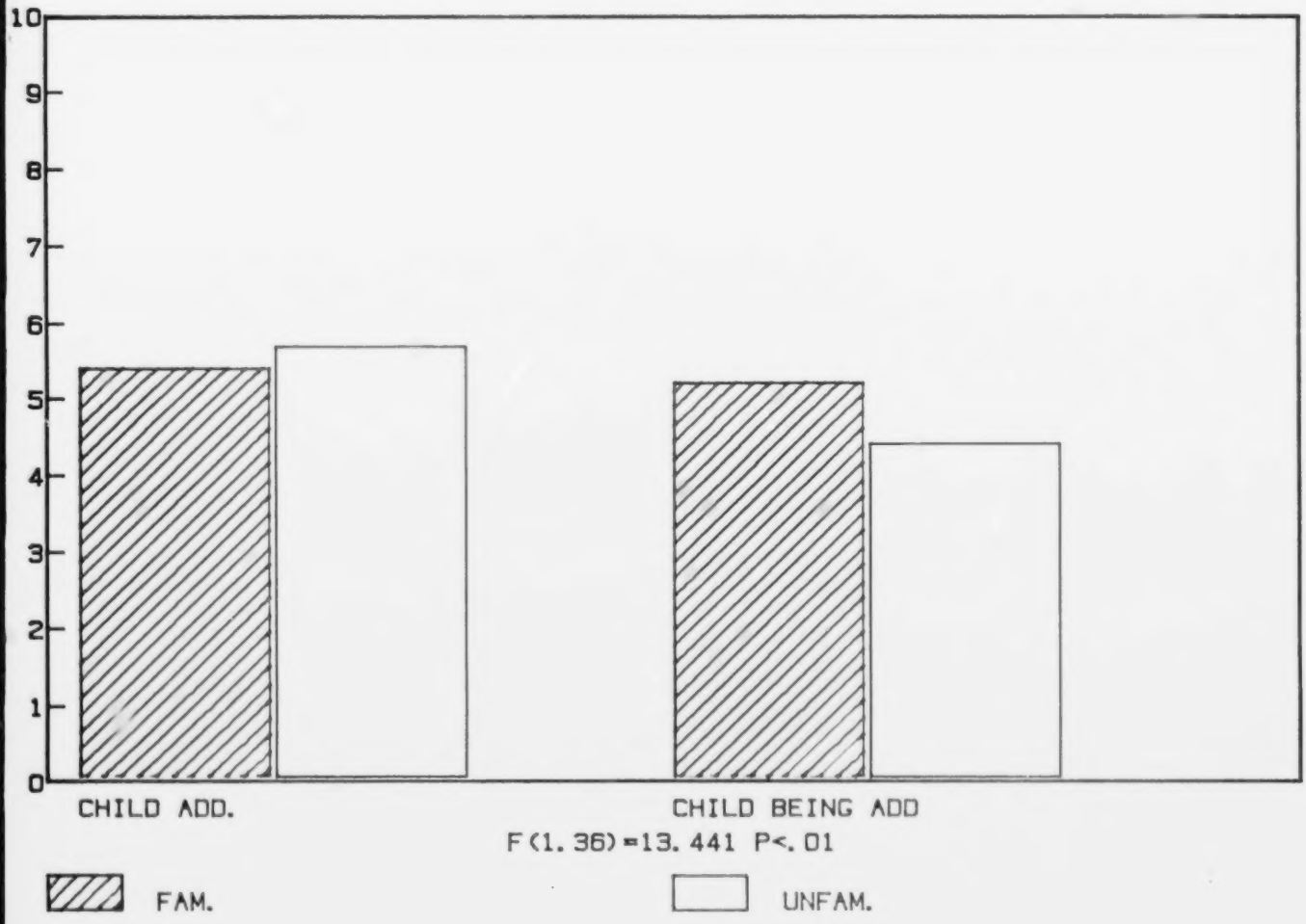
ATTRIBUTION OF POLITE AND IMPOLITE REQUESTS ACCORDING TO SPEAKER'S AND ADDRESSEE'S STSTUSES

Age levels	Addressee: Adult	Addressee: Child	
ITALIAN CHILDREN			
5 year olds			
polite request	8	4	
impolite request	7	6	
7 year olds			
polite request	6	4	
impolite request	4	6	
9 year olds			
polite request	8	2	
impolite request	3	7	(p<.05)
ENGLISH CHILDREN			
5 year olds			
polite request	6	6	
impolite request	6	6	
8 year olds			
polite request	~~6~~	~~3~~	
impolite request	~~2~~	~~7~~	(p<.05)

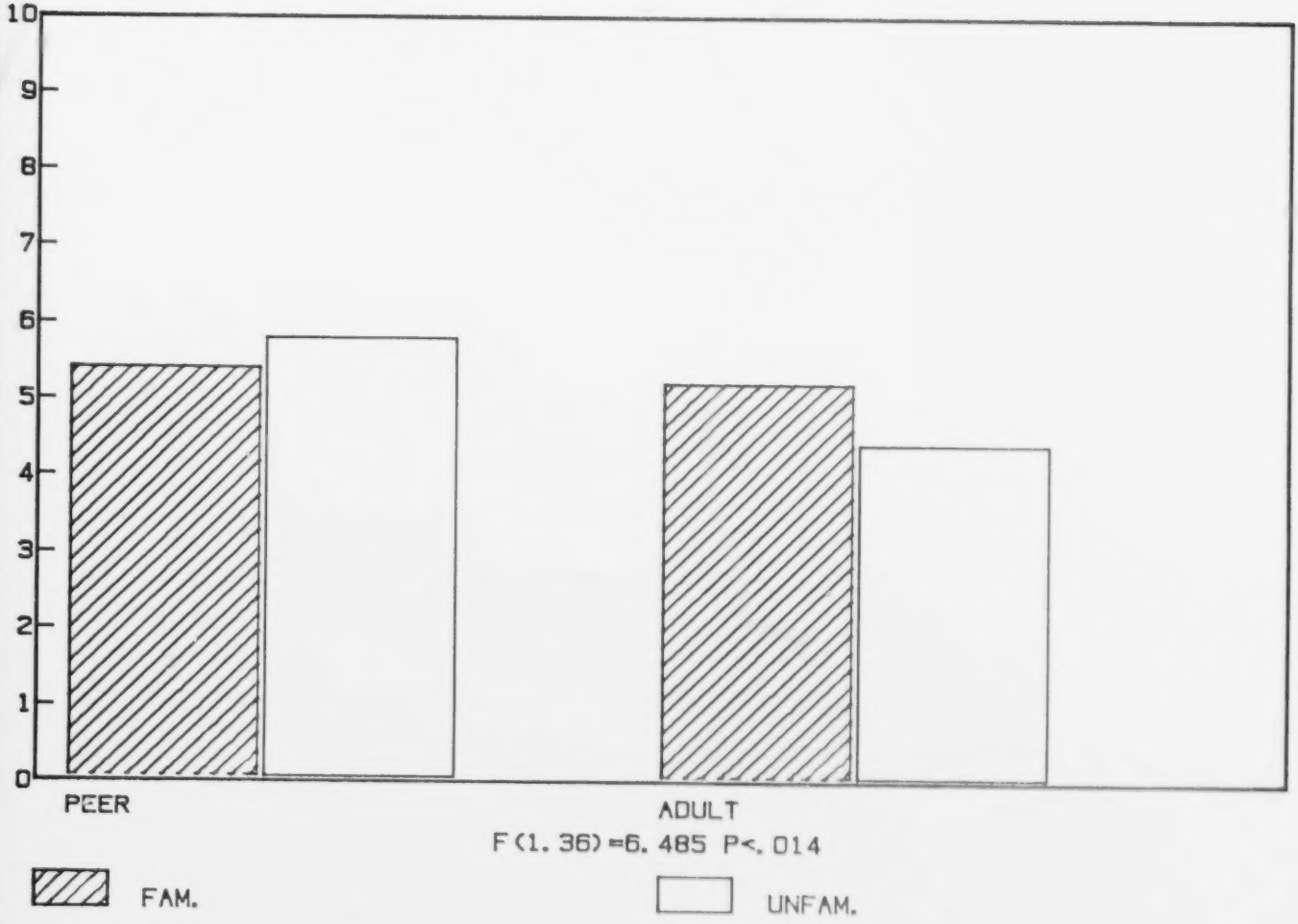
CU 2


10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
CHILD ADD.
CHILD BEING ADD
F(1, 36)=20.797 P<.001
PEER
ADULT

OV.4

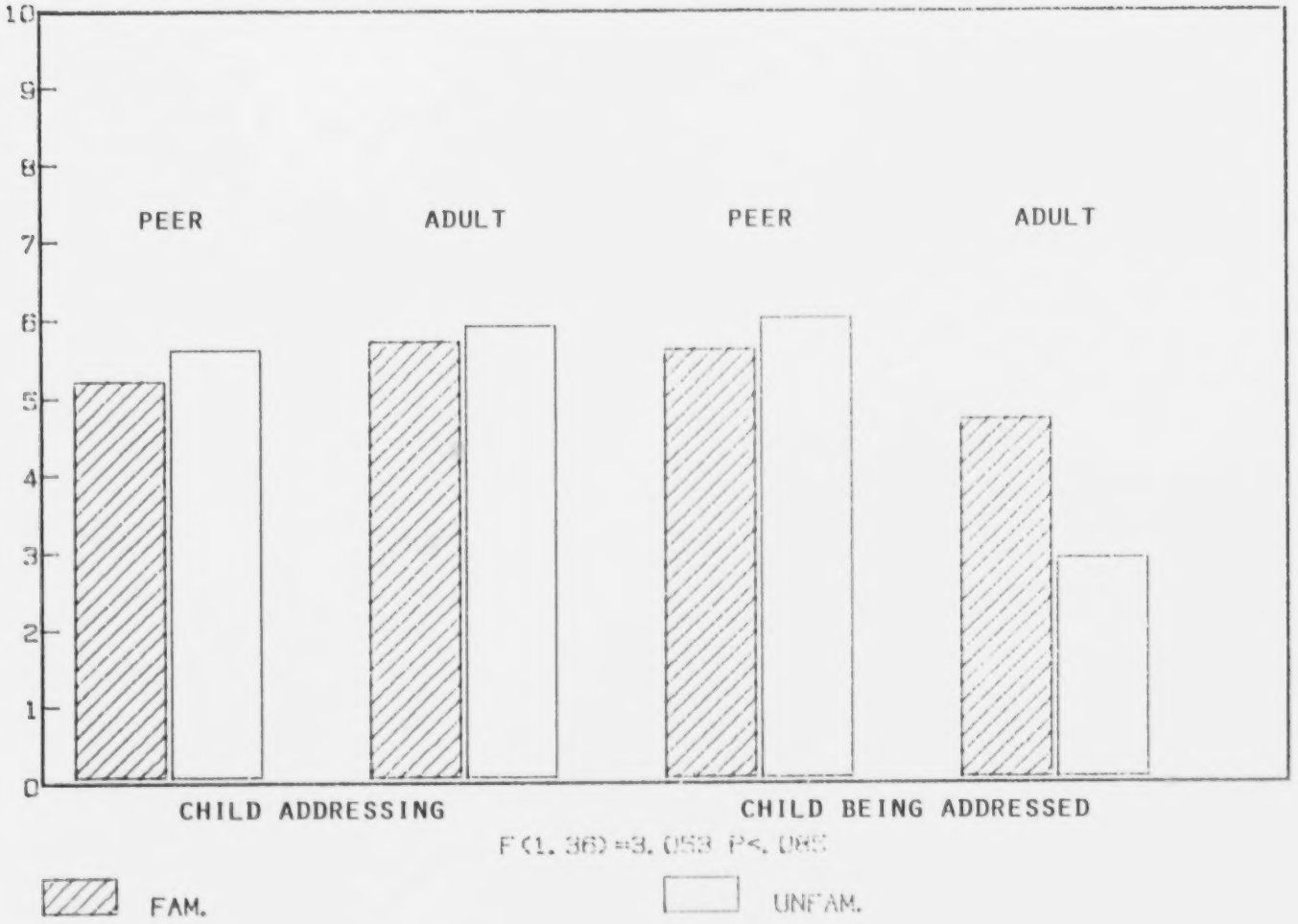

10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
CHILD ADD.
CHILD BEING ADD
F(1. 36)=13. 441 P<. 01
FAM.
UNFAM.

OV.5

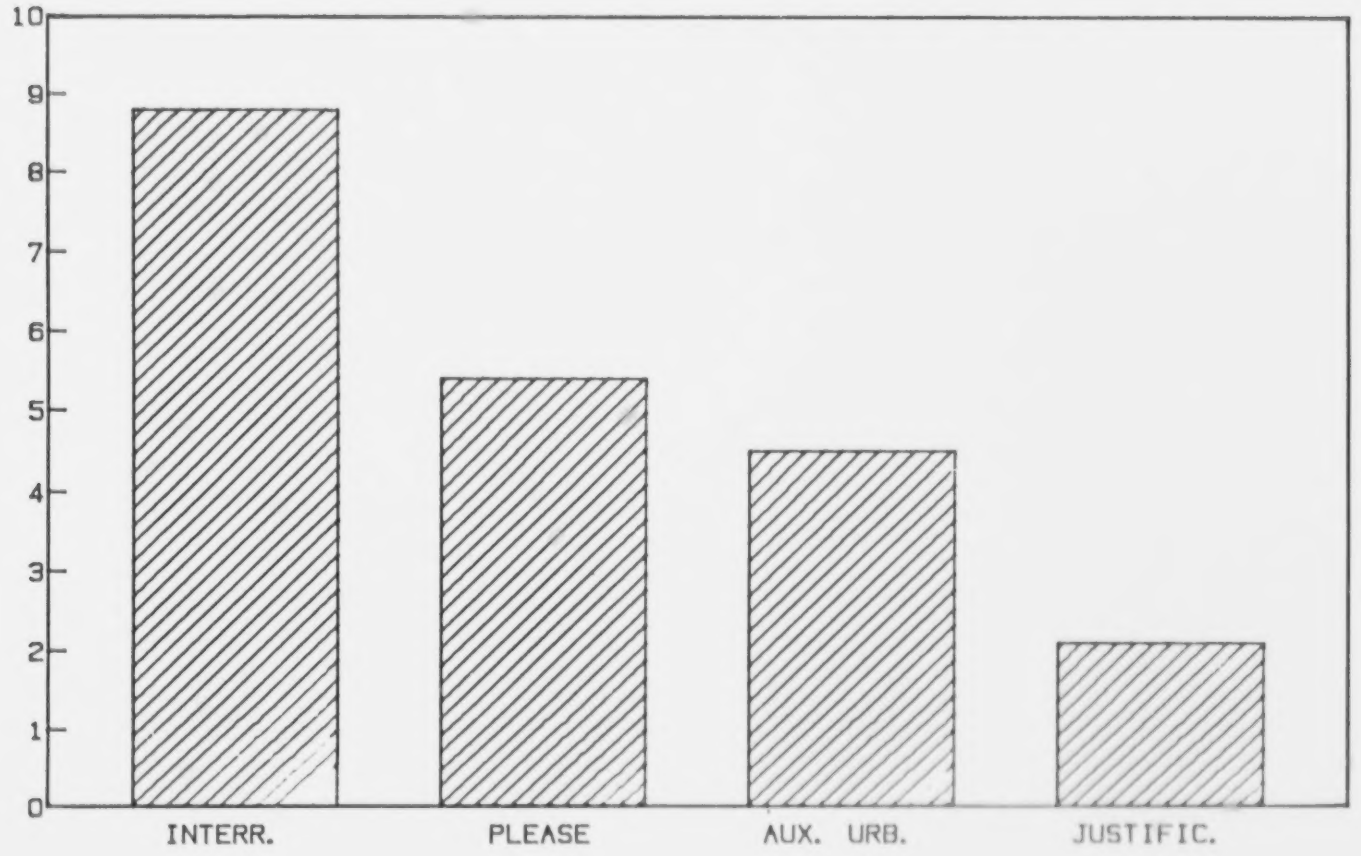


O V. G

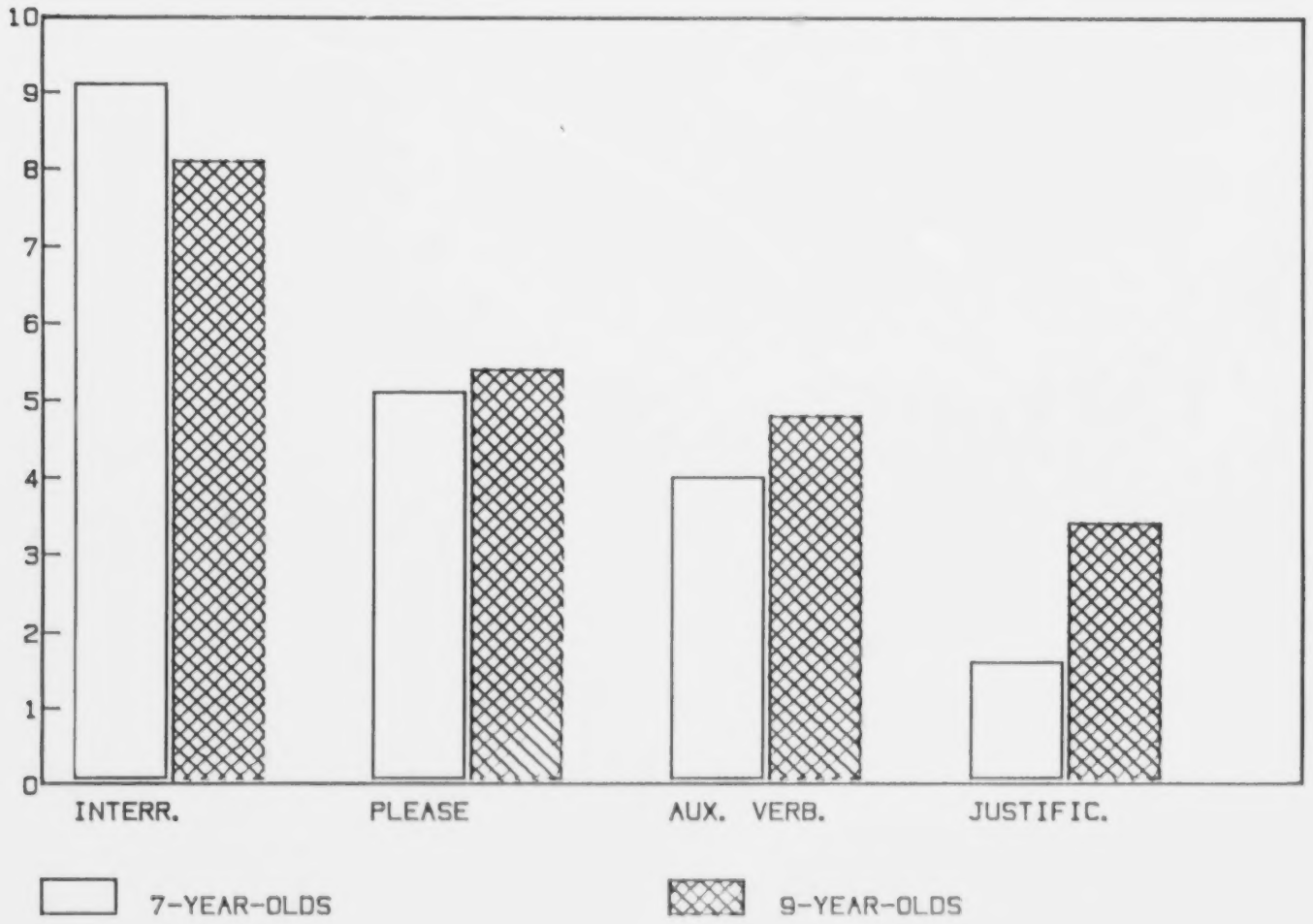
GENERAL TREND



OV. 7


LING. ELEM. GENERAL TREND
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
INTERR.
PLEASE
AUX. URB.
JUSTIFIC.

OV. 8


LING. ELEM.
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
INTERR.
PLEASE
AUX. VERB.
JUSTIFIC.
7-YEAR-OLDS
9-YEAR-OLDS

OV. 9.

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